



Books

**DAYS
of
AWE**

DAYS OF AWE. By S. Y. Agnon. Publishers, Shoken Books, New York, 1948. \$3.50.

Reviewed by Rabbi Dr. A. Altmann

It is no easy task to present an anthology on any major Jewish subject without incurring the risk of tediousness or pedantry. To collect and arrange relevant passages from a literature stretching over such vast regions as are covered by Judaism in its many aspects and facets is an unenviable undertaking unless approached with an artistic sense and from a profoundly spiritual angle. Otherwise the string of literary pearls may tend to appear monotonous and irritating instead of informative and inspiring. No one in modern Hebrew literature has proved himself a greater master of the art of anthology than S. Y. Agnon, the celebrated Palestinian author. His *Yamim Noraim*—a “treasury of traditions,” legends and learned commentaries concerning Rosh Hashanah, Yom-Kippur and the days between has already become a classic of its kind; for it combines the æsthetic sensitiveness of the artist with the competence and accuracy of the scholar. This treasury is culled from “three hundred volumes old and new” and is as varied in character and style as are, of necessity, the fruits of Jewish learning and devotion scattered over some three thousand years of history. The Early and Latter Rabbis, their codes and commentaries, Midrashic literature, the homilies of Sephardim and Ashkenazim, Responsa, Liturgical works, the philosophers and the moralists, kabbalistic writers and Hassidic Rabbis, all are assembled to add their voices to the impressive chorus testifying to the lofty ideas enshrined in the meaning of the “Days of Awe.” It is right that the apocryphal Ben Sira and the hellenistic Philo should have been admitted, to this illustrious company, the former having already the distinction of being cited in the Talmud, the latter having in more recent times gained recognition as one of Israel’s great leaders of thought. The chronological order inherent in the subject-matter provides an excellent method of presentation, and far from reading like an anthology, the book seems to present a coherent text full of interest from beginning to end.

A great boon has been bestowed upon all lovers of Judaism by the publication of an abridged English version of this work, thus making it accessible to a larger public. The selection of the material by Nahum M. Glatzer, the able and experienced editor, as well as the English translation by Maurice T. Galpert, revised, completed and prepared for publication by Jacob Sloan are extremely well done. The hope may be expressed that *Days of Awe* may adorn every Jewish bookshelf whose owner lays claim to a sense of living Jewish values.

Philosophy Today

Professor Einstein in his introduction to a recently published book¹ wrote “Publishing the book of knowledge for a small group deadens the philosophical spirit of a people and leads to spiritual poverty.” We live in a chaotic world, ruined, desperate, desolate, with man frustrated after two world wars, threatened by the menace of a third war even more destructive. Europe, and with it the whole world, is aimlessly balancing on a tight-rope between East and West. This opposition East-West is not, as the popular Press will have it, a clash between two ideologies. It existed long before Communism was ever considered a danger. It is the old clash between the old powers in a new garb. The opposition Great Britain-Russia existed in 1870. Now America has taken the place of Great Britain as the last defender, allegedly for the American way of life, which really is a moribund Capitalism.

That is how we see the situation. Now let us listen to what Jaspers the philosopher has to say: “What the situation will be in future, for this we have an example in the past, an example for orientation, not for imitation, the time of the Jewish prophets. Torn into shreds, devastated, Palestine had to experience its utter ruin in the clash between East and West, between the Empires of Babylonia and Egypt: a pawn in the policies of the Great Powers, attacked on all sides. Then prophets appeared with good counsel to enter into an alliance with East or West, to assure in this way the protection of friends, and thus to live happily. But against these prophets of weal, arose prophets of woe, which bear their great name to this day. They recognized the situation, rejected any leaning towards East or West. They saw the approach of the disaster. They did not see it as a chance happening caused by over-powerful engines of war, they saw in it a purpose, even if not discernible in detail. It is G-d who makes “the world tremble like curtains.” It is He Who causes the Assyrians to “subjugate people after people, to gather them like eggs that are left.” It is He Who directs the trend of events “men and States are used as tools, who do what they are meant to do, without sensing that it is G-d who wills it. The prophets who spoke in this way, wanted to stir their people and all men for the future. They had only one counsel: to obey G-d, to live a moral and righteous life. Whatever is World is created from nothing and is nothing by itself. What man does, gives it purpose, if he obeys G-d. What G-d wills has been laid down in the unalterable ever-valid Ten Commandments. What G-d may will beyond them, the prophets believed they knew by revelation, and they told the world. His words are full of meaning. G-d does not speak in plain language to man. It is necessary for man to resign himself in humility to not knowing. No answer is given to Job’s questions. The aged Jeremiah is the climax of conscious self-resignation.”

Man in his quest to know what is outside his life begins to philosophise. Primitive peoples do so and in their search for the unknown remain entangled in its idolatry. As we see every day, abstract thoughts being outside the grasp of primitive peoples, their speculative thoughts adhere to the concrete. The result is superstition. We often find that non-believers are superstitious. Their philosophy remains as it were in a state of deficient development. The whole world tries to philosophize: but partial solutions are taken for

¹ “Der Philosophische Glaube,” published by the Artemis Verlag in Munich, 1949. Author, Karl Jaspers, Professor of Philosophy at Basle.

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חזקוני

ORGAN OF JEWISH RELIGIOUS LABOUR



*"When an ensign is lifted up
on the mountains, see ye, and when
the trumpet is blown, hear ye."*

„כנשא נס הרים תראו
וכתקע שופר תשמעו."